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# American boots and Russian vodka – External factors in the colour revolutions of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan

Donnacha Ó Beacháin/Abel Polese

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## Abstract

Der Beitrag untersucht die Rolle von externem Druck in der Welle der sogenannten „farbigen Revolutionen“. Durch die Analyse dreier konkreter Fallbeispiele – der Rosenrevolution in Georgien (2003), der orangenen Revolution in der Ukraine (2004) und der Tulpenrevolution in Kirgisistan (2005) – versuchen wir die Wirkungsbedingungen, aber auch die Beschränkungen, aufzuzeigen, denen externe Akteure, vor allem die USA und Russland, innerhalb der Bewegungen unterlagen, die die Massen mobilisierten – was schließlich zum Sturz der nicht-demokratischen Regime führte.

## I. Introduction

When, in 2000, non violent protests succeeded in ousting Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, few thought this would be the beginning of a new wave of democratisation, or at least the weakening of authoritarian regimes, in the post-socialist world. Despite rumours that a similar strategy was being pursued by other movements throughout the post-socialist space, the Georgian events in 2003 still came as a relative surprise. A few months later, Ukraine, despite the size of the country, its regional differences, and the failure of such protests in the past, also experienced massive protests that changed the course of its history. At this point the colour revolution phenomenon gained such momentum, with both govern-

ments and oppositions concentrating their efforts on civil society,<sup>1</sup> that the Tulip revolution seemed destined to happen as a natural consequence of Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections in February and March 2005.<sup>2</sup> The fact that regime-change did occur in Kyrgyzstan arising from the elections prompted scholars to investigate the origins, connections, common features and future trends of all movements participating in the colour revolutions.

Whereas the first substantial NGO mobilization in the post-socialist world was witnessed in Slovakia in 1998,<sup>3</sup> Bunce and Wolchik look further back and see the origins of this bottom up strategy in the Serbian attempts to challenge Milošević (1996/97), and subsequent Romanian (1996) and Bulgarian (1997) "electoral revolutions" that gave a democratic opposition an electoral victory.<sup>4</sup> The idea of mobilizing people, during and after an election campaign, had been witnessed for the first time in the 1990s but the second element of those movements, their non violent character, had been introduced long before, with prominent examples including the Polish Solidarno[ movement in 1980/81, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (1989), and the protests in the Baltic states (1989–91) and Ukraine (1990).

Whether colour revolutions are still in progress is not clear for two reasons. First of all, if a non violent protest movement does not lead to any political

- 1 After the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, civil society became a priority not only for the opposition but also for a number of CIS governments. Notably the Russian authorities set up pro-Putin movements such as "Nashi" and "Molodaya Gvardiya Edionoy Rossii" while the Transnistrian government funded a PORA-inspired anti-revolutionary organization "Proryv". Cf., on Russia, Evgeny Finkel, *The View From the East: Russian Political Responses to Orange Revolution*, paper presented at the 12th Annual World Convention of Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), New York, 10–12 April 2007, and, on Transnistria, Elias Fennira, *Dynamiques internes d'un "conflit gelé" dans le voisinage de l'Union Européenne: Le cas de la République Moldave de Transnistrie*. MA thesis submitted to the College of Europe, Natolin Campus (Poland), 2007.
- 2 In the Kyrgyz case, according to Bessinger, the "reputation" and the results of previous colour revolutions had a decisive impact on the outcome of the Kyrgyz street protests. It was more the expectation of a revolution than the revolution itself that ultimately influenced the outcome of the protest. Cf. Mark Bessinger, *Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions*. In: *Perspective on Politics*, vol. 5(2), 2007.
- 3 Cf. Bessinger, *Structure and Example*; Graeme Herd, *Colorful Revolutions and the CIS: "Manufactured" Versus "Managed" Democracy?* In: *Problems of Post-Communism* 52 (2005) 2, pp. 3–18; Michael McFaul, *The Second Wave of Democratic Breakthroughs in the Post-Communist World: Comparing Serbia 2000, Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004 and Kyrgyzstan 2005*. In: *Danilw Jacyk Working Paper* no. 4, 2006; Joshua Tucker, *Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and the "2nd Wave" of Post-Communist Democratic Revolutions*. In: *Perspectives on Politics*, 5 (2007) 3, pp. 537–553. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duval, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, Palgrave 2001.
- 4 See Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions*. In: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39 (2006) 3, pp. 283–304.

change, can we still refer to it as a (failed) colour revolution?<sup>5</sup> Secondly, are colour revolutions restricted to post socialist spaces or can we use the expression also to define the events witnessed, for instance, in Nepal (2006) or Burma (2007)? A non violent strategy has been introduced and tested mostly in post-socialist spaces but we do not exclude that, with the appropriate modifications, it may be extended to other countries thus becoming a global phenomenon.

In this article, we have chosen to concentrate on three case studies, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, to illustrate the way different political environments led to similar results. By this choice we do not intend to deny the importance of “failed revolutions” to the understanding of the phenomenon; however, we believe that a major contribution can be made to the debate given the amount of primary material we have collected in these three countries. Both authors have worked for the Soros funded Civic Education Project as Fellows in Georgia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Ó Beacháin) and Ukraine (Polese) and overall have spent more than half a dozen years living in the region. This has enabled them to witness some revolutions, gain an understanding of foreign NGOs working in the region, and meet with key actors at all levels of society. As a result this article is based, apart from an analysis of secondary sources and media monitoring, on participant observation and interviews both with key actors and “ordinary people”. Given the typology of the material in our possession we think it is valuable to debate, in the course of this article, the importance of external factors in the three chosen cases to provide material for a better conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

The paper is structured as follows: after discussing the importance of the external factor in general to the attempted and successful colour revolutions we set out to present three case studies to elucidate the role and impact of foreign influences on protest movements and political change in the post-Soviet space.

## II. Throwing stones in glasshouses

Most of the post-Soviet elites were perturbed by the events in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and, to legitimise their hostility to the revolutions, condemned what they argued were American backed *coups d'état*. Criticism of the overthrown authoritarian regimes was replaced by sermons on the criminal injustice of “foreign intervention”. Putin declared the revolutions to be acts of “political-technology”, skilfully managed by the west. Russian analysts weighed in with critical evaluations;<sup>6</sup> small numbers of professional revolutionaries had been trained

5 See, for instance, events in Azerbaijan (2005), Belarus (2003 and 2006), Kazakhstan (2006) and Moldova (2005).

6 Cf. Russia: Putin Defends Reforms, Condemns ‘Revolutions’. In: RFE Online 23 December 2004; Russian FM Blames OSCE for Kyrgyz Unrest. In: RFE/RL 24 March

with the sole intention of artificially fermenting political upheaval while giving the impression that such revolts were spontaneous and enjoyed popular support while the reality was different. Thanks to the support of western politicians and western money protesters could get American winter boots and buy Russian vodka to keep people on the streets and give the impression of popular support for such actions. According to this view, these “manufactured democracies” were merely a cover for more sinister motives, aimed at extending US influence over the CIS. Few of the authoritarian leaders or their political acolytes in state academia or media saw any irony in their criticisms. After all, the idea of a small band of professional revolutionaries seizing power was the chief communist tactic devised and implemented by Lenin throughout the territories of the Russian Empire in 1917 after the 1905 “rehearsals”. Indeed, the position of autocrats like Vladimir Putin and Islam Karimov who complain of feigned emotions, flawed political processes, and artificial movements is one of rank hypocrisy. Putin, after all, is a former KGB agent who spent many years hunting dissidents in East Germany, a state that, under Soviet pressure, had perfected the art of compelling the population to participate in “spontaneous” and “genuine” parades and rallies to demonstrate support for the ruling regime. Islam Karimov is a former communist boss turned pseudo national leader who, in 2000, saw no harm in a two-man presidential contest in which his opponent advertised his intention of voting for Karimov.

The history of the Cold War was not only a clash of competing ideologies, but also of rival states that, due to their expansionism, would have collided in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century even if Russia had not embarked on the communist path.<sup>7</sup> That hostilities should be resumed after Russia recovered from the blows of Soviet collapse is not surprising. From the beginning of the Cold War, the US and Russia learned to justify their intervention anywhere in the world by referring to ideological imperatives. Americans always intervened, and keep doing so, in the name of democracy, whereas the USSR backed movements of national liberation to gain influence in the country. Little has changed except that “international ter-

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2005; Victor Yasmann. Russia: Moscow Grapples With Meaning Of Kyrgyz Uprising. In: RFE/RL 25 March 2005; Mark Almond, The Price of People Power. In: The Guardian 7 December 2004; Kelley Matt, US Money Has Helped Opposition in Ukraine. In: The Guardian, 11 December 2004; Ian Traynor, US Campaign Behind the Turmoil in Kiev. In: The Guardian 26 November 2004; The OTPOR factor in the Ukraine? In: Pravda, 23 November 2004; Ukraine crisis: A Western circus with Yushchenko, the clown. In: Pravda, 25 November 2004. More enthusiastic views on the revolutions can be read in Andreas Aslund, Ukraine whole and free: what I saw at the orange revolution, The Weekly Standard, 27 December 2004; Paul D’Anieri, The Last Hurrah: the 2004 Elections and the Limits of Machine Politics, Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 38 (2005) 2.

7 “Both were expansionist states whose respective spheres of interest eventually would expand to global dimensions”, Powaski has concluded, “such ambitious nations seemed destined to collide”. Ronald E. Powaski, The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union 1917–1991, Oxford 1998, p. 2.

rorism" has now been added to the interventionist lexicon, when neither the promise of democracy nor the existence of national liberation movements can be clearly demonstrated.

Deciding who has the legal right to intervene in a given territory has been of limited utility as power has convinced successive Russian and American leaders that their meddling in the affairs of other states is just and legitimate. In September 2002, Russia bombed Georgia from the air for allegedly harbouring Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge, which can be viewed as a similar act to the American bombing of Libya in 1986 intended as punishment for Ghadaffi's alleged dabbling in international terrorism. Putin has rightly identified a double standard when, for example, Kosovo is considered to be a candidate for self-determination despite being a part of Serbia according to international law, while the same logic is not applied to Abkhazia or South Ossetia.<sup>8</sup> However, Putin does his position favouring territorial integrity a great disservice by on the one hand supporting the Serb position on Kosovo and repressing separatists in Chechnya while openly encouraging and supporting separatism in Georgia as means of applying pressure on the Tbilisi government.

From an American perspective, the collapse of the USSR removed the Soviet threat and dictators could no longer hide behind the skirts of the superpowers. In particular, Latin American and African dictators found it more difficult to attract US support after the collapse of the USSR. Russia, the main Soviet successor state and long-time imperial power, has had to scale down her ambitions of global domination. Russia, however, still considers the territory of the former Soviet Union to be her natural sphere of influence. How else can we explain Russian's strong opposition to the democratic decision of sovereign governments like those in the Baltic States to become members of the EU and NATO? Rather than consider such decisions to be voluntary expressions of national wills, Russia insists on viewing them through the prism of Cold War politics. According to this view, America is seeking to consolidate its Cold War victory and, worse, to humiliate Russia by weaning former Soviet Republics away from the mother country. Unable to play the card of international terrorism, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US has decided that a more nuanced approach is necessary in the former Soviet Bloc; a silent and yet highly orchestrated series of revolutions designed to create western-orientated elites and thus outflank Russia in the never-ending Cold War game of chess. But to accept the neo-Soviet analysis of US inspired and funded manufactured democracies is to confuse Georgia and Ukraine with Iraq. This kind of revolution will not work as long as local people do not want it or feel ready for it. And while it is true that the US has pumped money into the former Soviet Republics to gain influence, Russia has conducted a similar policy. In particular, the supply of energy from Russia to the former

8 This is, however, a dangerous argument for Russian leaders to pursue as it opens up renewed dialogue regarding some of the Russian Federation's own errant republics like Chechnya or Tatarstan.

Soviet Republics is also a tool to exert influence. Those perceived to be leaving the Russian orbit have found that energy subsidies, or even supplies, can be abruptly halted. Using her impressive coercive power, Russia has tried to demonstrate that the countries of the “near abroad” should concentrate their attentions, if not their affections, on their large neighbour rather than their distant friend. As both Russia and the US seek to maximize their influence in the post-Soviet space, the Russian complaint of “foreign interference” is curious, to say the least.

Both the United States and Russia have invested incalculable amounts of money and human capital into the CIS countries. It is not crucial who has invested what in any particular country but how that money has been received; accepting money or even expertise does not necessarily mean accepting a political philosophy. Morrison has shown how western styles of factory management were re-interpreted in Russia to create a new system of values and administration that little resembled the original models<sup>9</sup> while Yong has exposed how money received in Ukraine served the career goals of the individual rather than support civil society.<sup>10</sup> Stiglitz has highlighted how loans from the World Bank to Russia were transferred into Cyprus bank accounts without resulting in any significant change in the country.<sup>11</sup> Domestic politics and societal norms are crucial determinants and investment does not guarantee compliance or even amity. Currency conversions, put simply, do not imply ideological ones.

It is our contention that the revolutionary movements of Georgia and Ukraine have had less an effect on the political systems than on the people who participated in these mass events. A revolution implies change on a mass level, not merely a modification of the highest echelons. Democracy is not a commodity that can be bought; it is a way of life that is daily affirmed, sometimes in the most trivial of ways. Saakashvili and Yushchenko did not introduce the idea of democracy to their respective countries.<sup>12</sup> Rather the democratic sentiments and actions of such large numbers of active citizens in Georgia and Ukraine have given the new presidents an opportunity to export the democratic aspirations of those who braved the winter cold into the heart of government.

9 Claudio Morrison, *Labour and Technological Discipline: Chaos and Order in a Russian Textile Company: Anthropological Perspectives on Economic Development and Integration*. In: *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 22 (2003), pp. 171–197.

10 Yi Lee Yong, *A Case study of the Civic Education Project*, unpublished manuscript, 2004.

11 Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents*, New York 2002.

12 For a more complete account of how Ukraine was on the way to democratisation well before Yushchenko's presidency see: Abel Polese, *Can Free Elections Secure Democratic Consolidation? An Analysis of Ukraine in 2006*. In: *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*, 4 (2007) 1, pp. 119–149. On Georgian democratisation before the Rose Revolution see: Stephen F. Jones, *Democracy from Below? Interest Groups in Georgian Society*. In: *Slavic Review*, 59 (2000) 1, pp. 42–73.

Through social and political organization Georgian and Ukrainian people trained themselves to build meritocratic structures and to respect them.<sup>13</sup> This is the real transformation; it is what happens before, not after, the “revolution”. If Ukrainian and Georgian people have succeeded in organizing themselves during the “revolution”, to maintain a peaceful movement in the face of provocation and frustration, to negotiate calmly with different interests, to contemplate the fundamental reorganization of their country, to think and not to be afraid to express their opinion – then these are the main successes of the revolution. Irrespective of whether the Ukrainians had been able to change the elections, it was soon clear that the elections had changed the Ukrainians,<sup>14</sup> while the Georgian people put into practice the social contract in its purest form; “no longer seeing Shevardnadze’s government as legitimate, they invoked their right to remove it.”<sup>15</sup>

The situation in Kyrgyzstan, though leading to a superficially similar result, is sufficiently different to set it apart from the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. A combination of western funding, domestic enthusiasm, and a weak state ruled by a president liberal by the standards of the region, had encouraged the growth of a vibrant civil society in many pockets of Kyrgyzstani society. Following the examples of Georgia and Ukraine, a number of groups openly mimicked the symbols and slogans of the Rose and Orange Revolutions. In the end, however, Akaev was ousted by shadowy figures whose agendas converged little with pro-democracy agitators except that they too wished to see the back of the Kyrgyz President. The “new” elite that reaped the political rewards arising from the upheaval was very much a re-cycling of discarded Akaev ministers. Though Kyrgyzstan shared many political conditions that had encouraged revolution in Georgia and Ukraine, the importance of southern clan loyalties had no obvious parallel in the Rose and Orange Revolutions. And while the struggle to topple Akaev did generate enthusiasm among civil society actors, these were quickly sidelined during the final push and when the political spoils were distributed. Moreover, the retention of the parliament produced by the discredited elections that precipitated the anti-Akaev protests further weakened the new leadership’s claim to represent a radical departure from past politics.

13 The very organization of a protest movement starting from civil society organizations not adopting any classical hierarchical structure is of very moment to future democratisation of a country according to Gene Sharp. Cf. *idem*, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Boston 1991.

14 Abel Polese, *The Future is Orange?* In: *Transitions Online*, 26 November 2004.

15 Eric Miller, *Smelling the Roses: Eduard Shevardnadze’s End and Georgia’s Future*. In: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 51 (2004) 2, pp. 12–21.



### III. Rose Revolution in Georgia

To understand the Rose Revolution, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of Georgian politics since the unravelling of Soviet domination in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More particularly, it is necessary to comprehend the circumstances that brought Eduard Shevardnadze to power, why the Georgian people initially welcomed him as a saviour, and why, ultimately, they felt compelled to dismiss him prematurely.

Known as the “silver fox” because of his crafty nature, Shevardnadze has also been described as a cat, not merely because of his nine lives, but also because of his ability to always land on his feet regardless of the situation.<sup>16</sup> Understandably, Shevardnadze objects to the term “revolution” being used to describe his removal from power and regrets not having anticipated events better: “I hate the word ‘revolution’. It was not a revolution. Forty or fifty people breaking into parliament – can you call that a revolution? [...] I felt it was a coup. I was forced out, and another man, who is President today, took my place.”<sup>17</sup>

Shevardnadze notes that such collective action was not unprecedented in Georgia, and reminds us that in November 2003 “it was the people coming into the streets, and we’ve had quite a few of these episodes during the last decade, although they have not usually resulted in a change of power.”<sup>18</sup> The word “usually” is important here, for since the collapse of the USSR there had only been one unconstitutional change of power as a result of irregular forms of protest and that had benefited Shevardnadze. In 1991, the democratically elected President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was violently overthrown, not by mass peaceful protests, but by ambitious warlords shelling the parliament building, where the hapless President had taken refuge. He escaped to Chechnya and received asylum. Gamsakhurdia and his supporters maintained that he was the legitimate President of Georgia until his death in 1994.

For Eduard Shevardnadze the years immediately following 1991 were perhaps the most challenging and successful in his long and varied career. On many occasions, he has pointed out that when he arrived in Tbilisi in March 1992, there was no legitimate government, chaos, gunfire in the streets and men armed with Kalashnikovs walking into cafes. Within two years, Georgia became an internationally recognized state with a constitution, a functioning parliament, and relatively fair and free elections. He had proved no better than Gamsakhurdia in tackling the thorny issue of secessionism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although he had demonstrated considerable personal valour by

16 Zaza Gachechiladze, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 13 February 2001.

17 Eduard Shevardnadze, interview given to the British Broadcasting Corporation (23 September 2005). Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4275092.stm>.

18 Interview with Eduard Shevardnadze. In: Zurab Karumidze/James V. Wertsch, *Enough!*, New York 2005, p. 29–34.

travelling to Sukhumi,<sup>19</sup> the Abkhaz capital, at the height of the war and staying until the very end of hostilities. It is not inaccurate to say that by 1995 – or at a stretch by 1997 – Shevardnadze had achieved much but politically had outlived his utility. Already in his mid sixties, Shevardnadze had put the institutions of the state in place but now fell back on his instincts and skills, honed during the Brezhnev years, of managing people rather than implementing policy. The ship of state had been built and it was now “steady as she goes”. Shevardnadze was at his best as a “fixer” of problems especially when a myriad of strong and conflicting personalities had to be managed. In November 2003, on the eve of the revolution, Shevardnadze was 75 years old and constitutionally obliged to step down when his term ended in 2005. He did not relish conversations on this subject, however. “Trying to talk to Shevardnadze four times in 2003 about what his future plans would be after his term ended”, one of his closest advisors recalls, “was like committing suicide four times”.<sup>20</sup>

Despite new electoral legislation, \$2.4 million paid by the US government to help the Shevardnadze administration prepare for the ballot and no less than five thousand watchful observers, the parliamentary elections held on 2 November 2003 indicated that procedural correctness had declined from the already low standards marking previous contests. The opposition parties did not maintain that they had gained a clear majority of votes rather they contested the accuracy of the results. According to Saakhishvili’s estimations, his party came first but did not win a majority. Shevardnadze’s acolytes would have remained in power and even perhaps retained a constitutional majority (a parliamentary majority large enough to change the constitution). A combination of traditional Soviet training, pure autocratic thought, and the symbolic importance of being “first” meant that the margin between opposition and Shevardnadze’s party might be small, but it was inconceivable that the government party could lose. Moreover, there was the alliance with Aslan Abashidze, who, as the authoritarian leader of the autonomous republic of Adjara could gain almost complete victory through fraud. Abashidze could expect nothing less than to be placed second after Shevardnadze in spite of receiving less votes than Saakashvili’s National Movement. Thus, regardless of the actual vote there was a political and symbolic imperative, which demanded that the National Movement should come third. It would be a respectable third, but third nonetheless.

The OSCE, which often uses standard formulas such as elections “fell below international standards”, was unusually harsh in its assessment of the election results. The organization’s report concluded that the election was “characterized by a clear lack of political will by the authorities to organize a genuine dem-

19 The city is known as Sukhumi by Georgians and internationally, though some Abkhaz prefer the name Sukhum.

20 Karumidze/Wertsch, Enough!, p. 59.

ocratic election process resulting in widespread and systematic election fraud.”<sup>21</sup> This was more than criticism; it was a dismissal. In allowing the corruption of the election process, which Shevardnadze usually attributed to over-zealous local officials, the Georgian President revealed not only his contempt for democratic principles but also a clear disregard for Western protests. Previous elections in the former USSR in his eyes had demonstrated the perfunctionary nature of western remonstrations. They were part of the democratic ritual; meaningless diplomatic motions, which would in no way hinder the continuation of regular political exchange. One of Shevardnadze’s closest associates visited him in the immediate aftermath of the elections armed with negative international assessments of the elections. “You amuse me”, Shevardnadze responded, “Don’t you know how these Westerners are? They will make a fuss for a few days, and they will calm down and life will go on as usual.”<sup>22</sup> Protests in central Tbilisi began almost immediately after the elections on 4 November quickly gaining support among the population. Until Shevardnadze’s fall on 23 November, protesters were continuously on the streets as one participant explained:

During the day there were several thousand people outside the parliament – from the Marriott Hotel to Freedom Square. People would stay until about midnight and then after that there was only a core of people who were staying – between three and five hundred – overnight. So the place was never abandoned but most of the people were going home to sleep. But then on the critical nights, many people stayed, and when the whole thing reached a climax people were standing all night because people feared that they would come and take the parliament back so they were staying there all night.<sup>23</sup>

Shevardnadze insisted that the election results were correct and began to devise ever-more exotic explanations for the voting irregularities and the resulting critique. On 7 November, he publicly addressed the issue of George Soros and the role of his organizations in undermining trust in the government and the electoral process. While admitting that some violations had taken place, the Georgian President questioned the role of particular international organizations. “What does Soros want? I am declaring a categorical protest against the actions of Soros”, Shevardnadze declared, adding, “everyone should know their place.”<sup>24</sup> The Georgian President then decided to talk to the protesters directly, as one *Kmara* leader recalls: “In the middle of one protest, early in the morning, about eight o’clock, even earlier, he [Shevardnadze] went there to the demonstration – alone – with one car and three guards. He got out [...] and then he was trying to talk to people but everyone was, like, avoiding him, like he was diseased

21 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observer Mission, Georgian Parliamentary Elections: Post-Election Interim Report. Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2003, p. 1.

22 Mikheil Saakashvili, interview with James V. Wertsch and Levan Mikeadze, Washington DC, 24 February 2004. In: Karumidze/Wertsch, Enough!, pp. 23–28, here 24.

23 Adrian Brisku, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 31 July 2005.

24 Giga Chikhladze/Irkali Chikhladze, The Rose Revolution: A Chronicle. In: Karumidze/Wertsch, Enough!, pp 1–20, here 8.

or something. He was trying to talk to someone but couldn't catch anyone until he caught one little boy, about ten years old and asked the boy 'aren't you afraid?' And the boy said, 'aren't *you* afraid?' And then Misha [Saakashvili] came."<sup>25</sup>

Shevardnadze left the crowd and held unsuccessful and acrimonious talks with Mikheil Saakashvili, leader of the National Movement and already emerging as the main rival to Shevardnadze, Zurab Zhvania, former Prime Minister and Shevardnadze acolyte turned dissident, and the independent speaker of parliament, Nino Burjanadze, also an erstwhile associate of the Georgian President. Having failed to woo the pro-democracy protesters, the Georgian President now had to look for autocratic support. Shevardnadze's increasing co-operation with and dependence on the Adjara regional despot, Aslan Abashidze, was seen by many as a demonstration of his worst characteristics; his willingness to enter into any alliance and sacrifice any moral principles in order to stay in power. The alliance with Abashidze made a mockery of any claims to represent democratic values or to be a force for unity. Abashidze was a classic dictator; the state was organized along feudal lines and controlled in a totalitarian fashion by the police. Though an integral part of Georgia Adjara was not in fact under Tbilisi control and on 7 November, Abashidze unilaterally announced that he had changed the constitution of the Adjara Autonomous Republic. It was a clear threat to the territorial integrity of Georgia, but he simultaneously pledged to do everything necessary to keep Shevardnadze in power: "If President Shevardnadze is not able to bring order, I will help him".<sup>26</sup> The implication of force was clear but rather than rebuking Abashidze, Shevardnadze welcomed his support and embraced the Adjara autocrat. On 10 November, the Georgian President flew to Batumi, where he was personally chauffeured by his Adjara ally. Declaring that he had "very much wanted to meet with Mr. Abashidze", Shevardnadze cemented his new alliance by claiming that "we were, are, and will be together." Abashidze, in turn, ominously vowed to "defend legal governmental powers. There cannot even be talk of changing the leadership of Georgia". Forecasting that if the opposition bloc came to power this "would be a catastrophe for Georgia", he said that "the enemies of Georgia, both from inside and outside the borders, were beginning to attack".<sup>27</sup>

Undoubtedly, the successful invasion of parliament on 22 November 2003 marked the climax of the Rose Revolution as tens of thousands surrounded the government buildings. Shevardnadze, who was addressing the new assembly, was whisked away by security as a defiant Saakashvili forced his way into the legislature. Negotiations then took place between Shevardnadze and the opposition leaders, while both the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and the American ambassador Richard Miles offered their services for mediation. In the night,

25 Kmara Leader, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 30 July 2005.

26 Chikhladze/Chikhladze, *The Rose Revolution*, p. 8.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Shevardnadze declared a state of emergency but it became clear that he could no longer rely on the security forces for some had allowed protesters to enter the parliament buildings. Gia Nodia has accurately described the sequence of events in Shevardnadze's last hours:

"In situations like that so much is psychological. It's about losing your nerve, losing your willpower. They just lost willpower [...] because these rallies continued for so long and, of course, the media was very powerful on the side of the opposition. I think they eroded their power base in the armed forces; the army and police. The people in those forces made up their mind and said we are not going to defend this government. It was very difficult to predict but it happened. I think that Shevardnadze's strategy was that he thought that time was on his side; people will get tired, the protest and energy will peter out, the weather was cold, etc. And he did not want to use force; he counted on that. But as these protests continued and as time passed they gained strength rather than diminished strength – his plan crumbled because of that [...] morale in the government was eroded, more and more people started to switch sides [...]. After being ousted from parliament I believe he was ready finally, psychologically ready, to use force but by that stage he simply did not have force to use. It was too late."<sup>28</sup>

Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania met with Shevardnadze on the 23 November. Nino Burjanadze, who, as parliamentary speaker, had been persuaded by Saakashvili to declare herself interim President, stayed in front of parliament buildings with the protesters. Whereas Shevardnadze has presented his decision to resign the same day as based on his wish to avoid any bloodshed, Saakashvili has explained that the Georgian President "was forced into resigning because everyone had deserted him."<sup>29</sup>

Though Shevardnadze was a hate figure for many in Russia and held responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union, a consensus emerged in the Kremlin that the Rose Revolution represented a defeat for Russian power in the region and resulted from a carefully orchestrated American conspiracy to install a more malleable regime in Tbilisi. Prominent activists and NGO leaders in Georgia reject the notion that the Rose Revolution was a coup manufactured by the West, as Liberty Institute Director, Levan Ramishvili, explained:

"It's not only in Moscow [that this argument is popular]; it was also said in some western media outlets. It reminds me of Soviet propaganda; when everything that was not controlled by the Kremlin and by the Politbüro was perceived as a CIA plot. It's maybe some sort of racism; that only white people in western Europe can be the initiators of democratic peaceful revolution, that we in this part of the world just can kill each other and if something happens that means it was somehow imported because we intellectually can somehow not handle this, because we are too stupid to be democratic agents. Of course, western influence played an important role in

28 Gia Nodia, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.

29 Mikheil Saakashvili interviewed by Zurab Karumidze and James V. Wertsch. In: Karumidze/Wertsch, *Enough!*, pp. 23–28, here 27.

everything because all these techniques, all these methodologies, all these manuals, tool-kits, I downloaded them from various anti-globalisation websites (laughs) [...] of course financial assistance was important; without this, it would have been much more difficult. But I don't think that this was decisive."<sup>30</sup>

Until the end, the US embassy in Georgia had seen its role as a mediator between Shevardnadze and the opposition. Indeed, according to one well-placed observer the US ambassador "tried to calm down the revolutionaries and stop them from being too radical."<sup>31</sup> All the Americans demanded was free and fair elections but since the regime did not intend to grant them, US involvement appeared a blatant endorsement of the opposition.

Victory for the opposition had been far from certain. No one could have been sure that a large body of protesters would be sufficiently motivated to persevere for several weeks during cold and wet November weather. It was not clear if such large crowds could remain disciplined and peaceful, nor was it certain that the government forces would not use violence to dispel the crowd. Events could have spiralled out of control leading even to a civil war. That wiser counsels prevailed is a credit to all sides. Memories of how quickly protest had triggered the civil war in the early 1990s had a restraining influence on everybody. Certainly, Shevardnadze supporters exploited fears of a return to the months succeeding the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia in 1992, as one *Rustavi 2* presenter recalled: "Shevardnadze people were playing on that; that's exactly what they were playing at. They were saying 'don't go out on to the streets'. TV was saying - Shevardnadze-supporting TV was saying - 'bloodshed will happen; we've been through this before. Georgians! What are you doing?' This was their major theme. Nobody got scared - luckily."<sup>32</sup>

Shevardnadze might have held on, had he been able to secure some external intervention. But, while external actors were willing to mediate, Shevardnadze had lost vital political support. He obtained the moral support of the Armenian and Azeri Presidents but both Russia and the United States professed neutrality. And in a situation where the legitimacy of the government was at stake, neutrality was interpreted as hostility by the regime and as encouragement by the opposition.

30 Levan Ramishvili, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.

31 Gia Nodia, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 28 July 2005.

32 Salome Asatiani, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Tbilisi, 31 July 2005.

#### IV. Orange Revolution in Ukraine

On Monday 22 November 2004, as snow was softly falling on Kiev, the main road, Boulevard Krishchatek, was occupied by several people fighting wind and cold to put up tents beside each other in the street. PORA, the main NGO of the homonymous civic campaign and the coordinator of street protests, was establishing its headquarters in the centre of Kiev, while Yuliya Timoshchenko, from a stage set in the middle of *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Square, hereinafter *Maidan*), cried out against election fraud.

External forces were far from neutral in November 2004 when whole teams of diplomats and politicians were deployed in Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> The whole election campaign, from the registration of candidates to the Yushchenko inauguration, can also be seen as an attempt by the West to catch up and counterbalance Russian influence in the country.

Because Moscow's presence in domestic politics had only been partially reduced after 1991, the West, during the 2004 electoral campaign, appeared as an intruder to the Kremlin. The US alone allocated more than 65 million dollars in 2003/2004 to support democratic initiatives, including independent media and NGO training. The Open Society Institute also instituted a fund from which NGOs could obtain election monitoring know-how. Support was also granted in the form of training in capacity building and non-violent methods of protest. Ukrainian NGO leaders and activists had been invited, since 2000, to international trainings in non-violent protest movements and civic disobedience.<sup>34</sup> As a complementary strategy, activists from *Otpor* (Serbia) and *Kmara* (Georgia) visited Ukraine to train local leaders.<sup>35</sup>

Russia could not be considered alien to the election campaign either though evidence was not easy to find as political elites were not always transparent<sup>36</sup> and the management of both external donations and state funds was not well

33 We refer here to unofficial visits of foreign diplomats to Ukraine; Zbigniew Brzeziński was reported by Wallander to have arrived in Ukraine before the elections; cf. Celeste Wallander, *Ukraine's Election: The Role of One International NGO*. In: CISI Report, March 2005, p. 92–193, here 95. Lech Wałęsa visited the Maidan city of tents and met with Yushchenko; on the Russian side, Yuri Lushkov, Major of Moscow, travelled to Donetsk and denounced the opposition as a “Sabbath of witches” pretending to “represent the whole of the nation”. Cf. Christopher John Chivers, *Supporters of President-Elect in Ukraine Push Back*. In: *New York Times* 28 November 2004.

34 Cf. Taras Kuzio, *Ukrainian Leaders Crack Down on Youth Groups Ahead of Election*. In: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 1 (109), 20 October 2004; Julie Corwin, *East: Regime Change on the Cheap*. In: *RFE/RL*, 19 April 2005.

35 For an exhaustive picture of the training modules, strategies and actions see Milos Krivokapic, *Les faiseurs des révolutions, entretien avec Aleksandar Maric*. In: *Politique Internationale*, 106, Winter 2005. See also Inna Kolesnikova, *Interv’u z Mikhailom Svistonchem* published on PORA website ([www.pora.org.ua](http://www.pora.org.ua)) in March 2005.

36 Cf. Rosaria Puglisi, *Economic Elites and Russian-Ukraine Relations*, London 2003.

publicized.<sup>37</sup> However the poisoning of Yushchenko,<sup>38</sup> allegedly prepared with the help of the FSB and the frequency of Kuchma-Putin visits,<sup>39</sup> were a clear signal that Moscow's attitude in 2004 would not be less intrusive than had been the case in the 2002 contest.<sup>40</sup>

The 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine were held according to a classic scenario. Since the Constitution did not allow the president to run for a further term,<sup>41</sup> a man who could continue the president's work was unofficially appointed some time before the elections. Viktor Yanukovich, an extremely popular figure in Donetsk having served as local governor (1997–2002), was appointed prime minister in 2002, early enough to gain popularity at national level. Yanukovich presented two main advantages: a high number of supporters in the pivotal, densely populated eastern regions – and controllability, being at risk of *kompromat*.<sup>42</sup>

The candidate the opposition would choose had been clear since 2002, when Our Ukraine became the largest party in the country: Viktor Yushchenko, former head of the national bank, Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001 and founder of the Our Ukraine bloc, was the favourite for the presidential post.<sup>43</sup>

- 37 Management of public funds, means and structures was not transparent during the elections as demonstrated by the spate of "suicides" that occurred once Yushchenko won the second runoff. Cf. Ukrainian minister's death probed. In: BBC Online 28 December 2004; and A Contract Suicide (Ukraine Minister's Death). In: Zerkalo nedeli; BBC Monitoring Service, UK 5 January 2004.
- 38 Yushchenko was hospitalised in a critical condition after dining with Ihor Smeshko, head of the SBU (Security Services of Ukraine) on 5 September. The version promoted by the authorities was that he had indigestion while the version of the opposition was that he was poisoned. Those subscribing to the dioxin thesis also suggest that the poisoning was carried out with the help of the Russian security services since the material is not obtainable in Ukraine.
- 39 It is interesting to note that a five day visit was organized under the pretext of visiting the parade celebrating Kiev's liberation from Nazi troops normally held on 6 November but brought forward to 28 October, three days before the elections.
- 40 For an insight into Russia's attitude in 2002 see: Kremlin Co-opting Ukraine's Communists in an anti-Yushchenko Front. In: Fortnight in Review, vol. 8(7), 2 April 2002.
- 41 Leonid Kuchma had been elected in 1994. In 1996 the Ukrainian Constitution, allowing a president to remain for a maximum of two mandates, was adopted. Kuchma was re-elected in 1999 and in 2003 the Constitutional Court ruled that the limit did not relate to Kuchma's first term, as it started before the Constitution was adopted, and thus he could be a candidate for the 2004 elections. The Council of Europe rejected this verdict and pressurised Kuchma not to run for a third time. European pressure was less decisive in influencing Kuchma's decision not to stand again than his lack of popularity, estimated at between five and eight percent in 2002. Taras Kuzio, Will political reform lead Ukraine out of its crisis? In: The Ukrainian Weekly, vol. LXXI No. 12, 23 March 2003.
- 42 Yanukovich had been imprisoned in 1967 for robbery (then amnestied) and in 1970 for assault and battery.
- 43 At first "Our Ukraine" and the Tymoshenko bloc supported Yushchenko. After the first round the Socialist Party of Oleksandr Moroz, who failed to win enough votes, also joined the "orange coalition". The Communist Party, headed by Petro Simonenko, refused to support either candidate in the runoff.



From the beginning of the campaign, Russia preached a position of neutrality that, as in the Georgian case, had a deep political significance. Putin declared his will to let Ukraine freely choose its president but, given the historical involvement of Moscow in Ukrainian politics, this sounded rather like “the West should take care of its own business and let Ukraine follow its course”.

For their part, the EU and US, while acknowledging Ukraine’s low standards in matters of human rights, media freedom, and the capacity to comply with good electoral standards, made clear that they hoped, or even expected, that elections would be fair and free.<sup>44</sup>

After the first round of the elections, Yushchenko, despite infractions registered all over the country, had a slight advantage on his opponent: 39.87 % against 39.32 % The opposition preferred not to complain too much, sparing energy and resources for the runoff. Russia and the West waited; the first, confident, the latter hopeful. The fact that the authorities had acknowledged Yushchenko’s superiority encouraged the secret hope that a combination of massive support for Yushchenko and the limitations of falsification technology, unable to deal with such high preferences for the opposition candidate, would allow Yushchenko a victory in the second round.

Behind the scenes, nonetheless, the scenario for a revolution was being set. As it turned out afterwards, the opposition anticipated most of the techniques that pro-Yanukovich forces intended to use (including allowing a slight Yushchenko edge in the first round to give the impression of honesty). This is why the period between the 31 October and 21 November 2004 can be seen as the most intense of the campaign: an agreement with security forces had to be reached,<sup>45</sup> logistical preparation of the protest had to be perfected and people had to be motivated to take to the streets in case of massive falsifications.<sup>46</sup>

The 21 November ballot was a formality: that evening government exit polls announced a Yanukovich victory and this was confirmed by the official results of the Central Electoral Commission after the counting of around ninety percent of ballots (it had taken three weeks to count the first round ballots). The following day Putin congratulated Yanukovich and three days afterwards the Electoral Commission officially announced Yanukovich’s victory.

The opposition promptly reacted: the day of the elections, irrespective of the result, a stage was set in *Maidan*.<sup>47</sup> In the evening, parallel exit polls carried out

44 There were strong allegations that the mayoral elections held in April 2004 in Mukachevo, a town in western Ukraine, had been falsified. The EU did not take any official position but based on this event urged Ukraine to exert more control on the processing of election results.

45 Cf. Taras Kuzio, Did Ukraine’s Secret Service Really Prevent Bloodshed During the Orange Revolution? In: Eurasian Daily Monitor, vol. 2, no. 16, 24 January 2005.

46 Cf. Olga Dimitrichieva, Tatyana Silina/Sergey Rakhmanin, Anatomiya Dushi Maidana (interview with Yurii Lutsenko, Taras Stetskiv and Vladimir Filenko). In: Zerkalo Nedeli, 50 (525), 11 December 2004.

47 The manner in which the results would be falsified was clear to the opposition, as is made clear in the transcription of telephone conversations published in Ukrainska

by experts not related to the government like the Kiev International Institute of Sociology gave the opposite verdict to the official one and the opposition called for people to go down to the street and occupy the centre of Kiev for an historic protest that would change the history of the country.

The United States firmly refused to accept the results of the elections and prepared a list of Ukrainians who would be denied a visa should Yanukovich become president. The European Union, although unable to produce a common position, informally pressurised Russia and at the EU-Russia summit on the 25 November in Hague there was little space for discussion of any issue other than Ukraine. Russia, in turn, played the card of speed and non interference: once the results were known, it made no sense to discuss them – after all the US presidential elections in 2000 had been alleged to be rigged.

Perhaps, in a different context, claims of falsifications would have been ignored and, after some noise, the results would have been acknowledged; but November 2004 in Ukraine was a turning point for the opposition, which, emboldened by an unprecedented crowd, would be the decisive influence on events.

The crowd picketed the parliament, blocked the streets, and virtually stopped the country. The message was clear: “we will not move from here as long as justice is not done”. There was no reason for the government to be worried but for the quantity and quality of the protesters, living in a “city of tents” in the centre of the capital indifferent to snow and below-zero temperatures, and reaching one million protesters on 27 November, when *Kreshchatik* became an immense open air discotheque. The final dismissal of the “tent city” would happen only after Yushchenko’s inauguration in January 2005.

The days preceding the result of political negotiations were extremely tense; there was increasing international attention on Ukraine and the crowd became a political actor to be reckoned with, uncomfortable for the government and Russia but nightmarishly real. In this respect, government forces split into those willing and unwilling to use force to disperse the protesters. The former recalled that similar anti government actions had been sedated by the police in 2000 and 2001 and advocated a similar strategy: provocateurs attempted to infiltrate to provoke riots while the army was being mobilized. Rumours of Russian troops crossing the border and deploying around Kiev also reached the ear of the people but, ultimately, force remained an unused option for two main reasons.

Firstly, there was a lack of agreement within the governmental forces for a number of Ministry of Interior officials made clear that they would refuse to attack their own people. In this respect the slogan “*militsiya s narodom*”<sup>48</sup> was

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Pravda, an internet newspaper ([www.pravda.com.ua](http://www.pravda.com.ua)), show. An English version of these conversations can be found in Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine’s Orange Revolution*, Yale 2006.

48 Literally “the police is with the people”. This happened after the defence forces split into pro-Yanukovich and pro-Yushchenko factions.

just the climax of long and tense negotiations that neutralized the threat of police confrontation.<sup>49</sup> The second reason for police inertia was the size of the protests. Nobody, not even the most optimistic opposition leaders, had expected such a massive mobilization of people.<sup>50</sup>

Another government tactic was to organize a “blue force” to counterbalance the orange one. Yanukovich supporters occupied an area close to the railway station and pitched tents some 500 metres from *Maidan*. At first, some physical assaults to orange supporters were recorded but, after a few days, it became clear that counter-protests were not an option to balance the orange supporters: either *Yanukovichers*, upon meeting with *Yushchenkoers*, engaged in political, and pacific, debate and ended up eating all together at the free buffet in *Maidan*, before taking a final family blue-orange picture together, or just faded away, supposedly returning home.

Once the whole country was blocked because of massive strikes, with the centre of the capital gathering crowds of hundreds of thousands of people for more than a week, and with no end in sight, the existence of a political crisis was impossible to deny. As Ukraine was unable to deal with it alone, the EU sent its representative, Javier Solana, together with Polish and Lithuanian presidents Aleksander Kwasnieski and Valdas Adamkus. The OSCE sent Jan Kubis, while Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister and Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma completed the team mediating the Yushchenko-Yanukovich negotiations.

The official results of the negotiations are of secondary importance to the very fact that negotiations were held at all, that the government had been obliged to step back and acknowledge the importance of the opposition in domestic politics. Eventually negotiations would lead to a constitutional reform that would transform the country, after the 2006 parliamentary elections, from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. The negotiations gave the opposition what it wanted, the possibility of repeating the second round, while keeping Yanukovich and his staff out of the main arena for little more than one year, during which time he could organize to win back the prime ministerial post.

The situation unlocked, the balance of external forces operating in the country changed radically. The EU had participated as a peer of Russia and could

49 Cf. Christopher John Chivers, *Back Channels, A Crackdown Averted: How Top Spies in Ukraine Changed the Nation's Path*. In: *New York Times*, 17 January 2005; Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Weak opposition gives Yushchenko a free hand*. In: *Oxford Analytica*, 24 January 2005; the same, *Did Ukraine's Secret Service Really Prevent Bloodshed During the Orange Revolution?* In: *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 16, 24 January 2005; Jan Sunden, *Leonid Kuchma, hero for our time*. In: *The Kiev Post*, 20 January 2005.

50 Cf. Annexes in Vladislav Kaskiv/Iryna Chuparyna/Anastasiya Bezverkha/Yevhen Zolotarov, *A Case Study of the Civic Campaign PORA and the Orange revolution in Ukraine*. Published on the official website of PORA ([www.pora.org.ua](http://www.pora.org.ua)). See also Wallander, *Ukraine's Election*.

claim, in such a crisis situation, the same rights as Moscow to be involved in the political decisions of Ukraine. Subsequent to this political agreement, the Supreme Court was free to deliver a verdict on election falsification. Free is perhaps not the best word; it might be more appropriate to say that the judges had been subjected to psychological pressures (and most likely death threats) from both sides. At least this is one interpretation of the judge's hiccup attack while reading out the final verdict.

The circle had to be closed. On the 2 December, Kuchma flew to Moscow, meeting Putin, to discuss the results of the negotiations. Both, Kuchma and Putin, criticized the decision to run a third round: "what if people are not satisfied with this? Are we going to have a fourth and a fifth one until everybody is satisfied?" Timid attempts were made to propose the holding of brand new elections in 2005 but they went unheeded. Russia *de facto* had accepted "foreign" influences in Ukrainian elections. The enthusiasm for this historic moment was visible: thousands of election observers were sent to Ukraine and the eyes of the world witnessed Yushchenko's victory, 51.99 percent against to 44.20 for Yanukovich. On the 23 January 2005 Yushchenko was sworn in as president of Ukraine and Yuliya Tymoshenko, known to Ukraine as the most charismatic politician of the Orange Revolution, was appointed Prime Minister a few days later by virtue of a secret agreement signed with Yushchenko during the election campaign.

The official position of Russia was, and is, that the Orange Revolution had been a move of political technology, manoeuvred by the opposition and the west. It is certainly true that the West had a major role in the events. Nonetheless, given the size of the protests, the political maturity shown by the electorate during and after the 2004 events,<sup>51</sup> the organization of NGOs, and the enthusiasm demonstrated, it can be argued that the people have influenced political events at least as much as politics, including Western actors, have influenced the people.

## V. Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan

Since 1991, Kyrgyzstan had been ruled by Askar Akaev, a politician by accident whose liberal instincts had won him widespread praise in the early nineties and earned Kyrgyzstan the epithet "the island of democracy" in Central Asia.<sup>52</sup> By the end of the decade, most of the shine had gone from Akaev's regime. Poverty was rife, corruption institutionalised, and the Akaev family had enriched them-

51 Sergey Rakhmanin, Afterglow of the Passing Epoch. In: Zerkalo nedeli, 12 (591), 1 April 2006.

52 For an overview of Akaev's political evolution see Regine A. Spector, The Transformation of Askar Akaev, President of Kyrgyzstan. In: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post Soviet Working Paper Series, Berkeley 2004.

selves while simultaneously weakening rival power institutions.<sup>53</sup> Akaev might still have retired with honour and not a little gratitude had he stepped down in 2000 but his decision to contest the election that year, helped by creative constitutional amendments, sealed his fate. Kyrgyzstan staggered amid growing debts and institutional decay. Evidence that it might not all end peacefully first emerged in 2002 when police shot dead six protesters in the southern town of Aksy. Emboldened by a post 11 September anti-terrorist alliance with the United States, Akaev had decided to act decisively against thousands of southern demonstrators protesting against the imprisonment of popular local parliamentarian, Azimbek Beknazarov, on politically motivated charges.<sup>54</sup> Akaev responded to the crisis by dismissing key officials, including Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev and promising a package of reforms. This bought Akaev some time but he gained few friends in the process, and a large swath of opinion in southern Kyrgyzstan remained implacably hostile to his regime.<sup>55</sup>

Parliamentary elections, held in two rounds on 27 February and 13 March, were the trigger for the Tulip Revolution and the overthrow of Akaev. A key difference between the build up to the Kyrgyz elections and those that had preceded them in Georgia and Ukraine was how the expectation of a colour revolution became a big issue in the election, sometimes overshadowing the contest. Deeply unsettled by the fate of Edward Shevardnadze, Akaev flagged his concerns shortly after the Rose Revolution as his speeches adopted an unmistakably anti-western character.<sup>56</sup> On 25 December, the day before Yushchenko won the “third” round of elections in Ukraine, Akaev addressed the people on state television, criticized what he called “foreign funded revolutions”, and warned that similar events in Kyrgyzstan would be detrimental to the people’s interests.<sup>57</sup> Akaev returned to the theme on 11 January when making a major address proclaiming 2005 to be the year of social stability and housing construction: “What makes the danger worse is that our homegrown provocateurs now have skilled coaches who have learned how to use provocations [...] No significant event has occurred [...] but certain groups are already trying to pitch tents and infect people with the yellow plague [...] I want to call on the entire nation to counter the exporters of revolution and the provocateurs.”<sup>58</sup>

The Kyrgyz opposition had also tried to learn lessons from the Rose and Orange Revolutions. Following the example of Georgia and Ukraine, a small

53 According to opposition figures, three quarters of presidential appointments were purchased.

54 Azimbek Beknazarov, interview with Donnaha Ó Beacháin, 11 March 2005.

55 See International Crisis Group, *Kyrgyzstan’s Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy*. In: ICG, Osh/Brussels, 20 August 2002.

56 Leila Saralaeva, *Kyrgyzstan’s Fading Romance With the West*. In: *International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, 25 June 2004.

57 Gulnoza Saidazimova, *Fragmented Kyrgyz Opposition Up Against Entrenched Interests*. In: *RFE/RL Newline*, 7 January 2005.

58 *RFE/RL Newline*, 12 January 2005.

coterie of opposition activists in Bishkek sought to adopt the symbols that would advertise and emblematised their cause. Initially some opposition leaders adopted yellow while others favoured pink. Yet others donned purple. The lemon was briefly considered by *Kel-Kel* (Kyrgyzstan's youth movement modelled on *Kmara* and PORA) as a possible symbol but this was replaced by the tulip partly because the lemon was also adopted by a pro-government clone.<sup>59</sup> When one activist, soon to become a leader of *Kel-Kel*, arrived at the first protest in January 2005 she found a small group addressed by Tursenbek Akunov,<sup>60</sup> a human rights activist and parliamentary candidate in Naryn, who was trying gain a consensus on what the symbols of the Kyrgyz revolutionary effort would be: "He was saying 'that's how history starts, look you are making history [...] should we chose the tulip or should we chose that [...] will it be the tulip revolution, yeah it will be like that' because he was in Ukraine too and he likes this idea of a symbolic revolution [...]. And next day when I came to the square, to the *Jogorku Kenesh* [Kyrgyz parliament], these Human Rights Committee people were giving out yellow colours already. I don't know why they chose this colour but later on as I hear Rosa Otubayeva was explaining to people that yellow is the colour of change, the colour of optimism."<sup>61</sup>

Alive to the threat to his position, Akaev moved closer to Russia. In 2003, a Russian military base had opened in Kyrgyzstan and in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, senior government officials, including Akaev himself, visited Moscow. The Kyrgyz president introduced his son, Aidar, to Putin, provoking speculation that Akaev was planning an Azerbaijani style transfer of power. On his return from Moscow, Akaev announced a number of measures that amounted to an expansion of the Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan and a corresponding diminution of US capabilities.<sup>62</sup>

Complementary to these moves closer to the Kremlin was a shift in Akaev's rhetoric towards criticizing many of his former admirers. George Soros, a frequent visitor to Kyrgyzstan and former ally of Akaev in the 1990s, was now pre-

59 In what must rank as one of the most bizarre tactics employed by the government to counter a colour revolution, within two days of *Kel-Kel*'s founding the Akaev regime manufactured a pro-government youth group also called *Kel-Kel* that adopted the same slogans, symbols and website (which was duly given to them) but articulated a different political message. The Akaev regime had obviously studied the rise of similar youth movements in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine and concluded that they should be nipped in the bud.

60 In the 28 February vote, he received 828 votes (3.3 % of total cast) in the Narinskii Okrug (No. 33). At time of writing (January 2008) he remains a strong critic of the Bakiev government.

61 Senior *Kel-Kel* activist, interview with Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 10 March 2005. In 2005, Rosa Otunbayeva was a former foreign minister turned opposition leader who was denied permission to contest the election. She had sought to register as a candidate in the university constituency in Bishkek, the same constituency that Akaev's daughter, Bermet, was contesting.

62 *Kommersant* 12 February 2005 as reported in Gulnoza Saidazimova, *Is Bishkek Moving Toward Russia Ahead of Elections?* In: RFE/RL, 15 February 2005.

sented as a bogeyman inciting mawkish youth to rebellion.<sup>63</sup> The OSCE was criticized for interfering in Kyrgyz domestic affairs and failing to understand local realities.<sup>64</sup> Preempting expected criticisms, the Kyrgyz Election Commission chairman said that the CIS observer missions would assess the election “more objectively and realistically” than the OSCE as “we share the same historical background, we have a common mentality, a common culture.”<sup>65</sup>

The election did contain the usual flaws of many post-soviet contests. Administrative resources were shamelessly misused, students were coerced into voting en masse for pro-government candidates, and there had been intimidation of independent media. On the other hand, only thirty one of the seventy five available seats were filled in the first round suggesting a high level of competition.<sup>66</sup> Though the south of Kyrgyzstan was in turmoil, with the second round of elections behind him Akaev felt the worst was over and claimed that “we’ve discovered an antidote to the ‘tulip’ revolution that they planned in our country.”<sup>67</sup> Akaev was bluffing, of course; there was no antidote. Protests grew over the next few days, particularly in the cities of Osh, Jalalabad, Naryn and Talas. Much of the south became de facto impendent of Bishkek rule with government administration in rebel hands; the sole highway connecting north and south (which cut through the mountains) was shut and Osh airport was occupied to prevent the government sending reinforcements. The opposition created a parallel system of government in the south by occupying administration buildings in key cities and electing popular governors to replace the Akaev government officials. Like Shevardnadze in Georgia, Akaev’s death-knell accompanied his decision to plough ahead and open the contentious new parliament. Sixty nine of parliament’s seventy five seats had been filled at this point and fifty eight members of the newly elected legislature were in attendance. Twenty two members of the old parliament signed a petition rejecting the new legislature in light of opposition allegations of electoral fraud.

The climax in Bishkek on 24 March was sudden and unexpected. Several thousand people representing a variety of different interests and regions converged on Bishkek. Kel-Kel had prepared themselves for a long struggle and tried to organize tents and food supplies for their protesters. In the afternoon, several hundred protesters arrived from Osh, and despite appeals to join the peaceful rally, they marched on the White House and were joined by others from the rally. The willingness of the security forces to fire on people had notably diminished at this stage. They were under instructions not to provoke a clash but

63 On 27 January, the official government newspaper Kyrgyz Tuusu published an article accusing the American billionaire of “preparing young generations for revolutions”.

64 Saralaeva, Kyrgyzstan’s Fading Romance With the West.

65 Saidazimova, Is Bishkek Moving Toward Russia.

66 See OSCE/ODIHR, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Warsaw, 28 February 2005.

67 Daniel Kimmage, Elections in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan – Antidote To Revolution? In: RFE/RL, 16 March 2005.

the poorly paid police and troops were certainly not motivated to risk their lives in a confrontation. Moreover, some police chiefs, perhaps detecting the way the wind was blowing, made it clear publicly that if ordered to fire on demonstrators they would refuse and join the protesters.<sup>68</sup> After two assaults had been driven back from the presidential palace the police were overwhelmed and fled. The demonstrators then took control of the White House. Akaev had fled and it was quickly announced that he had left the country.

With the departure of Akaev, enthusiasts claimed that the Tulip Revolution had triumphed and Kyrgyzstan had now followed the example of Georgia and Ukraine. The situation was less disciplined, however, than had been the case in Tbilisi and Kiev; a night of rioting and looting gripped the city. Felix Kulov, the former Mayor of Bishkek imprisoned by the Akaev regime in 2001 on politically motivated charges, was rescued from prison by a mob that stormed the jail on 24 March and within hours was acting head of Kyrgyzstan's security services with the primary task of restoring order. He imposed a curfew on Bishkek, organized militias and threatened that lethal force will be used to counter looters. Initially, Akaev's messages from abroad were defiant; he described his ousting as a coup organized by political adventurers under the guise of false revolutionary slogans and appeals. He also declared his intention not to resign though he eventually relented and relinquished office in return for guarantees in a deal struck in Moscow on 4 April.

Desperate for some good news in light of the deteriorating situation in Iraq, the White House in Washington was quick to claim ownership of the revolution, which only fed the spurious claims of Kremlin apologists. Praising US policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Wall Street Journal fancifully described Kyrgyzstan as the latest state to join "the global march of freedom led by President Bush."<sup>69</sup> Certainly, Akaev's departure aroused jubilation among key American funded NGOs in Kyrgyzstan like the National Democratic Institute and the Soros Foundation.<sup>70</sup> A joint address to the Kyrgyz people on 31 March by Saakashvili and Yushchenko, further fuelled accusations of a foreign conspiracy to export revolution.<sup>71</sup>

Opinion makers in Russia were alarmed by events in Kyrgyzstan, which were attributed to western mischief making and clan rivalries. The popular mood in

68 When asked in a phone interview with Moscow's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, whether he would consider using force against the people, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Internal Affairs Ministry, Keneshbek Dyushebayev, replied "No. Moreover, if I am given an order to do so, I shall go over to the demonstrator's side". In: *There Will be No Interethnic Clashes in Kyrgyzstan*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 March 2005, p. 4.

69 As quoted in Stefan Wagstyl, *Writing on the wall for Soviet-era leaders*. In: *Financial Times*, 25 March 2005.

70 Donnacha Ó Beacháin's recollections at meetings with National Democratic Institute, Open Society Institute and International Crisis Group in Bishkek, March-May 2005.

71 See the President of Georgia website for full text [www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=10&st=10&id=28](http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=10&st=10&id=28), last accessed 22 December 2007.



Russia was perhaps best captured in the title of one article published in the influential *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: “Are We Losing Kyrgyzstan?” which corresponded with the popular notion that Russia somehow “possessed” the Central Asian state.<sup>72</sup> But Putin had learned from his mistakes in Georgia and Ukraine. While publicly welcoming Akaev to stay in Russia, he immediately accorded de facto recognition to the interim regime: “These people are well-known to us. Working in Kyrgyzstan bodes of power and administration over a number of years, they have helped the development of relations between Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation, and done a great deal to establish the current level of intergovernmental relations. I hope that in the future our relations will be in the same vector, i.e. positively [...] there is every reason for this [as] recent statements by the leaders of the opposition confirm [...] I expect that this is how it will be.”<sup>73</sup>

Putin had ample opportunity to size up the opposition and knew that he had important leverage with any new leadership that emerged. By gracefully accepting the new political dispensation, Putin realised that he had a chance of directing the new leadership. From the outset, Russia played a key role; when a ruffled but defiant Akaev turned up in Moscow he refused to resign as president and without his voluntary resignation the new leaders in Bishkek were faced with something of a constitutional crisis.<sup>74</sup> Before Akaev would relent, the opposition had to send representatives to Moscow who, under the watchful eye of the Kremlin, brokered a deal guaranteeing the deposed president’s interests.

Kyrgyzstan’s political elite was, contrary to Mikheil Saakashvili and his young Turks, unmistakably Soviet in origin. Their political orientations had been moulded by the Soviet regime and, in the absence of a velvet revolution in the early 1990s, opposition tended to come from the national nomenklatura; the key figures were certainly not dissidents like Lech Wałęsa or Vaclav Havel. This quickly became clear during the coming weeks and months. Though the Kyrgyz Supreme Court had annulled the elections on 24 March, the new leadership decided to keep the new parliament for all its faults. This was despite the expectation of the outgoing parliament and many opposition activists that free and fair elections would be held to produce a legislature, the legitimacy of which would be beyond reproach. By keeping the parliament that Akaev had sought to manufacture for his own ends, the new leadership avoided upsetting the incoming parliamentarians who had invested so much in winning their seats but, as so often had been done in the past, traded stability for liberty. Far from being a child of the revolution, the parliament was to be the same legislature that Akaev had conceived and delivered.

72 *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 23 March 2005, p. 2.

73 As reported on [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru), 25 March 2005.

74 Some oppositionists, like Beknazarov, argued that Akaev’s flight amounted to de facto abdication but key leaders like Kulov and Bakiev favoured obtaining a formal resignation from the President.

The democratic impulse was further suppressed when the two major contenders for the presidency, Kurmanbek Bakiev and Felix Kulov, negotiated a pact whereby they would divide the spoils between them; Bakiev would take the presidency while Kulov would be Prime Minister. While presented by supporters as a victory for democracy and inter-ethnic harmony (Bakiev's support base was in the south whereas Kulov was strongest in the north), the deal deprived the electorate of a clear choice and made the subsequent presidential election in July 2005 more a coronation than a contest.

## VI. Conclusion: Recipes for revolution

Democratic impulses have been evident in every former Soviet republic, some, of course, much weaker than others, but only Georgia and Ukraine have produced mass democratic movements that have managed to dislodge the incumbent regimes. If there is a recipe for revolution, we must not only attempt to identify the requisite ingredients but explain why the same ingredients when baked in different national ovens do not produce the same results.

Both Kuchma and Shevardnadze had come to power in the early 1990s, replacing what they considered more nationalistic alternatives. Though presenting themselves as bulwarks against instability, the pragmatism without core values they practiced led to cynicism and apathy until mass electoral manipulation finally tried the patience of large sections of the population. But despite the justifiable blackening of their reputations by opposition critics, both Shevardnadze and Kuchma presided over regimes that were relatively liberal and pluralistic when compared with many other post-soviet regimes such as Belarus and Uzbekistan. An independent media was allowed to develop; this was particularly so in the print media but also to a lesser extent with television. *Rustavi 2* in Georgia and *Channel 5* in Ukraine played an influential role in providing a sympathetic platform for opposition viewpoints and even the state media was not as obsequiously pro-government as in many other post-communist regimes. The NGO sector had proliferated in Georgia and Ukraine. Civic movements had been successful in both countries, and though often funded by foreign sources, they had managed to develop a distinctive vision of politics and democratic life. The attitude of the population had already changed over time, which is why it is much more accurate to view the Rose and Orange revolutions as part of democratic processes not merely as isolated "events".

Askar Akaev was also a leader whose political leanings were liberal by the standards of the region and, though increasingly threatened, an independent media and vibrant NGO sector did exist in Kyrgyzstan prior to March 2005. But while the Tulip revolution may have had many of the ingredients of those in Georgia and Ukraine it was half-baked. People rushed to action without having

the conceptual ground paved; the result was minimal institutional change and rapid popular disillusionment. Insufficient time had been available to build a mass democratic movement and the accusation sometimes levied against the Rose and Orange Revolutions, that what resulted merely was a circulation of elites,<sup>75</sup> carries more weight in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Cognisant of pressure from powerful neighbours like Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the lukewarm support of distant democratic regimes, the post-Akaev government in Bishkek did little to move Kyrgyzstan towards liberal democratic values. Though the key beneficiaries of the Tulip Revolution may have been found wanting, there is reason to believe that civic activism is on the rise as witnessed by the activities of the umbrella movement "For Reform" and the large demonstrations throughout 2006 and 2007 to implement key democratic reforms indicate that the departure of Akaev has not put most of the basic issues facing the Kyrgyz people to rest.<sup>76</sup>

It is also important to acknowledge that there exists, in no small part thanks to the revolutions, an international network of opposition movements, adept in the tactics of peaceful protest and civil disobedience – and this may be a force to reckon with in the future. Autocrats in other post-Soviet states view these networks as a "democratic Al Quaida", working in highly organized cells, plotting instability, and planning violent regime change. In this sense, they have decided to completely overlook the peaceful nature of power transfer in Georgia and Ukraine, preferring instead to maintain their increasingly shaky position of *après moi le deluge* or, more appropriately perhaps, *sans moi le deluge* since the autocrats have made no provision for their retirement.

It is erroneous to believe that initiatives that prove successful in one country can be exported without difficulty to other states to achieve the same results; this is reductive and ignores completely cultural and social factors particular to every country. Rather than viewing the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions as an unconstitutional action undertaken by manipulated mobs serving the interests of those unhappy with the result of the election, it is more accurate to say that it was the Governments of Georgia and Ukraine that first acted unconstitutionally by rigging the elections. The opposition was then faced with a choice: either accept the fruits of such unconstitutional actions, i.e. an illegitimate regime not representative of the people's wishes, or to follow the government into the unconstitutional wilderness and to try and drag the political system back on to the constitutional path by challenging the illegitimate results and demanding free and fair elections.

75 See for example Theodor Tudoroiu, Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The failed Post-Soviet Revolutions. In: Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 40 (2007) 3, pp. 315–34.

76 International Crisis Group, Kyrgyzstan On the Edge. In: ICG, Osh/Brussels, 9 November 2006.

Since the revolutions, it has become fashionable in some circles to highlight the inevitable gap between the expectations excited by the revolution and the less glamorous reality that will remain for many years to come. Talk of wilting roses and rotting oranges is facile, and often, though not exclusively, promoted by those who were most against the revolution in the first place and are eager to justify their instinctive distaste for the new leaderships. To dismiss the revolutions in such a manner is to miss the point. The rose or orange victories were important not so much in the result as in the process, which involved the mobilization of large sections of the population to actively battle for democratic elections. Victory for Saakashvili or Yushchenko was but a first decisive step in what will be a long journey. The fact that they did not reach their destination in a single leap but instead merely took a step in the right direction should not be underestimated, particularly in regions where history has been largely a litany of steps down long and winding *cul de sacs*.